

WITHOUT BENEFIT OF DOGMA

BY FRED SMITH

IF I UNDERSTAND the ultra-nonconforming bodies of Protestantism aright in their purpose, it is that they exist to give breathing space to that religious experience which desires to live without benefit of dogma. To the fearful, who are more often spoken of as "the faithful," this is a provision fraught with grave danger. The history of the Christian faith has run in strange channels because of this undertow of fear. Instead of a metaphysic allied to morality, there came to be a standardised norm that had seemingly little relation to it. In the shade of holiness hypocrisy found its richest soil. The centuries brought an increasing compulsion instead of a finer comradeship. There was the form but not the force of godliness. Then came the Reformation, and, what is often overlooked by Church historians, the Renaissance. The quest for a religion that could exist without benefit of dogma became noticeable.

Incidentally, it is interesting to observe that the Catholic Church, whose pride in dogma is unabashed, has always provided an alcove, so to speak, within its walls for those who sought a religious experience beyond the bounds of dogma. It has never tolerated those who sought a religious experience that might exist without benefit of dogma. In this she revealed both her shrewdness and her spirituality. No religious organization ever becomes so stereotyped as to be incapable of seeing that however much a religionist must be conformable to dogma his religion has also relation to life. Hence the providing of the Catholic church for the mystic. Like springs of living water, the mystic has refreshed the life of the church even when he has not brought any new revelation. But the church authorities saw to it that while the mystic, *en rapport* with God, might go beyond law, he must not be allowed to be free of

it. Always does the Catholic mystic rise from the banked ground of dogma. This also must be his landing port, no matter in what ecstatic realms he may soar. As Macintosh has discerningly reminded us, "the mystic is the dogmatist *par excellence*." The mystic is the dew-drop reflecting, microcosmically, the Holy Catholic Church.

Not so is it in the ultra-nonconforming bodies of Protestantism. It has been said that "Protestantism produces no saints," which is partly true, if one is thinking in terms of a pattern; but wholly wrong if one is thinking in terms of personality. For all such Coleridge spoke the defining word when of himself he once said that he "was a member of the Holy, Catholic Church, of which at present I am the only member." Unfortunately, Protestantism, in the main, has been but Catholicism without the emphasising capital. It has proved itself, in many respects, to be but Catholicism in small type. Both have dragged in the dust, instead of lifting up to heaven, the mighty word—catholicity. One need but read the story of foreign missions to have this proved in either case. At home, both have given of their strength, in a major way, building fences to safeguard religion. Dogmas have been upraised that religion, pure and undefiled, should be buttressed and boundaried.

Varied and manifold has been the emphasis which has been laid upon the content necessary to achieve this end. Creeds and catechisms have been devised and revised that children might early learn to talk in the words of their fathers and call that being true to faith. Unless a man take care, it is easy to give his children the gift of his interpretation of religion in such a way that it at last proves to be a gag. What was supposed, in the first place, to strengthen, begins at last to strangle. There can be little progress made in the realizing of a religion without benefit of dogma until the recipient in early life comes to the knowledge that, at the first, religious instruction is nothing more than the generous loan of religious tools in the interest of conduct which is not yet free to choose.

Our concern, however, is with the problem which is beyond the good and evil of this preliminary stage. The time should arrive for all of us when we cease to be leaners and become, in the finest sense of this word, learners. For unless this be achieved religion will remain what it seems to be for so many, little more than an induced enthusiasm created by the constant repetition of a formula.

Religion is not itself unless it be personal and vital. To use the early emphasis which Luther gave this matter, religion means "justification by faith alone," or (to add Paul to Luther) it is "nothing."

Unfortunately Protestants, unlike the dogmatists in the Catholic Church, have not always been true to the spirit of their own genius. Men will insist on the necessity of dogma. Instead of the Pope they give supreme authority to a Book. Typical in the thought of many is the conclusion stated in the following words of a recent religious writer: "Evangelical Christianity is Bible-Christianity and so it must ever remain." Orthodoxy has a veritable passion for saying the last word. Dogmatism would put a lock upon the future and call that the preserving of faith. But surely what truth calls for is loyalty, not a lock.

Religion will have continuance in proportion as it has relation to freedom. A fear-hedged faith is not a growing faith. Even they who claim emancipation from a shackling dogmatism seem not always to manifest the freedom which they avow. One is reminded of this in the words of John Haynes Holmes when he says that "it is here that our Modernists, even the best of them, betray us and themselves. They will dally, these Modernists, with ideas of the supernatural—that Jesus, the Bible, the creeds, the Church, have an authority in God which is apart from and above the earthly experience of man. With this superstition, even in its most diluted form, the break must be absolute if religion is to be made consistent with truth."

Our observation is that not many are willing to make this "break." Many are constrained but few choose. To find a person with such a religious experience is rare. To be a Christian without benefit of dogma is too strenuous an experience for the great majority. Where there is a semblance of this, one has usually regretfully to admit that praise must be given to an intention rather than an achievement. "In the world," said Goethe, "there are many echoes but few voices." "'Tis remarkable," said Emerson, "that our faith in ecstasy consists with total inexperience of it." How often one looks for Christ in these days and finds instead a creed. Instead of a faith there is a formula.

But creeds are the deposit of faith, so the orthodox say. Perhaps so. Yet how comes it that so often they prove the death of it? Very interesting is the comment of Paul in this connection

where he refers, in writing to the Corinthian Church, to the law of Moses as "an administration of death." It is "the Spirit" which "makes alive." Among Christians in general it is noticeable that they have arrived at their religious concepts by way of their mother's teaching rather than by way of their own thinking. Yet it should be apparent to all that a religion to be retained in age calls for attainment. We are so made that we accept the creeds ere we have power to prove them true. Yet it should not be forgotten that the religion which puts a premium on innocence does not put any on ignorance. It is well to begin one's religion with the mind of a child; but it will not come to completion unless one has the mind of a Christ. Many men have found that only by turning their back on their mother's religion have they been able to face God squarely. Said my own mother to me when young: "Unless you come to a better religion than I have ever had I shall not think much of you." I think I have been able to improve on her creeds but not particularly on her Christianity.

The strength of any man's religion lies in the fact as to whether he was indoctrinated into it or whether it has been inborn in him. There is a sense in which every man's religion must be, as it were, virgin born. It must be gestated within himself. It asks not for any benefit of dogma. Unless a man be the father of himself he is still undelivered so far as his cosmic life is concerned. "Whoso would be a man must be a nonconformist. . . . He who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness." Thus Emerson. It is for every man to find his completeness in his own way. "Religion," says Whitehead, "is what a man does with his solitariness." Too often men have been persuaded that it was what a man did with the creeds. Wherefore did men consult the past when they should have been conferring with themselves and God. One should be able to view the concepts of the past without being under any necessity to accept its creeds.

Orthodoxy has seldom been modest, I had almost said, moral in its claims. Someone, I think it was either Bushnell or Chalmers, once spoke of "the expulsive power of a great affection." The dogmatist is always strong for expulsion. Their chief faith is in themselves, self appointed megaphones of the unchallengeable truths of God. Of such a one in our time it has been said that he "coolly

universalizes his own experience and insists that his particular brand of Christianity is the only valid and vital Christianity." What men call Protestantism is often nothing more than Catholicism with a changed emphasis. The fundamentalists have told us concerning the six essential dogmas (or is it five) which all must believe or be forever damned. Others, equally emphatic, make the number ten. Wherefore there arises the reacting modernist followed in due time by those called humanists. Let no man be afraid of any of them, but rather let him say: "A peep at all your arguments." Then, upbuilding his own faith, it will be well for him to pray the prayer of Abul Fazl:

"O God in every temple I see people that see thee, and in every language I hear spoken, people praise thee.

Polytheism and Islam feel after thee.

Each religion says, 'Thou art one without equal.'

If it be a mosque people murmur the holy prayer.

And if it be a Christian Church, people ring the bell from love to Thee.

Sometimes I frequent the Christian cloister and sometimes the mosque.

But it's thou whom I search from temple to temple.

The elect have no dealings with either heresy or orthodoxy; for neither of them stands behind the screen of thy truth.

Heresy to the heretic, and religion to the orthodox.

But the dust of the rose-petal belongs to the heart of the perfume seller."

This is to bring to birth a religion without benefit of dogma.

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